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ABSTRACT

A study examines teacher's and children's interactions with the use of the writing journal in a pre-k classroom (ages 3 to 4). Eight pre-school children and three teachers in a university lab school were observed twice a week for 1-hour sessions over a 6-month period. The use of the writing journal was a part of the total learning environment which involved a developmental, experience-based curriculum. Data included participant observation, field notes, informal interviews, and writing samples. Five emerging themes considered from the children's perspective were noteworthy: (1) ownership of the writing journal; (2) confusion in the writing; (3) feelings/emotions about writing; (4) hesitancy/questioning; and (5) intrinsic motivation. Two themes from the teacher's perspective were also noteworthy: confusion about the activity of the writing journal; and questions about the efficacy of the writing journal. Findings suggest that both children and teachers have much to gain in literacy and language development in the use of the writing journal. (RS)

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CHILDREN'S AND TEACHER'S INTERACTION WITH THE WRITING JOURNAL IN A PRE-K CLASSROOM

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Children's and Teacher's Interaction with the Writing Journal in a Pre-K Classroom

INTRODUCTION

The area of emergent writing is becoming more widespread in discussion and implementation in early childhood literacy education (Dyson, 1990). Holdaway (1979) comments on the fact that young three and four year old children "begin to play with writing in the same way as they play with reading" (p. 47). Also, young children begin to see that writing "carries a message" (p. 47). This part of emergent writing development as expressed by the use of the writing journal in teaching has been used in many classrooms (Newman, 1984; Manning, Manning, and Hughes, 1987; and Morrow, 1989). Graves (1983) and Hansen (1987) suggest that children can and should write. Some have commented on the notion that children can start writing as soon as school starts (Giacobbe, 1981). Little study has been done looking at both the teacher and children's interaction with the use of the writing journal in a pre-k classroom (ages 3 - 4).

SUBJECTS

This study took place over a six month period of time, twice a week for one hour sessions. The use of the writing journal was a part of the total learning environment which involved a developmental, experienced based curriculum. Each child had a folder that they had decorated that kept their writing and blank white paper. The children both were free to write in the journal and, at times, had limited

instruction from the teachers. Eight pre-school children, four boys and four girls, and the three teachers in this university lab school were chosen to participate in this study. One of the teachers of the three was referred to as the Guiding teacher. This teacher holds a M.A. in Early Childhood Education. Also, this teacher is responsible for the daily operation and curriculum development of the pre-k division. The other two teachers were graduate assistant/students in the graduate program working on the M.A. in Early Childhood Education.

METHODS/TECHNIQUES

This study employed the use of symbolic interaction as the theoretical framework. This is the perspective which emphasizes the importance of discovering meanings for actions as others see them. Symbolic interaction also helps us to understand from the perspective of the group or individual person (Blumer, 1969). The constant comparative method (Bogdan and Bilken, 1982) was used for data gathering and analysis. The use of participant observation, field notes, informal interviews, and writing samples were gathered for data analysis. The three teachers were also involved in the data gathering. The analysis was on going throughout the study. I was interested in how the participants (teachers and children) perceived the writing journal, how the children interpreted their role in doing this activity, and what this activity meant to all the participants.

RESULTS

Using the categories as stated above, I looked for emerging themes to examine the interactions with the use of the writing journal in the pre-k classroom setting. This study seems to suggest that three and four year olds in a developmentally appropriate pre-k program have a desire to "play with writing" (Holdaway, 1979, p. 47). Also, a surprising result was the themes that emerged for the teachers involved in the study. Thus, this study seems to confirm the notion that young children can be involved in writing activities such as the writing journal.

Many activities were observed during this study and many themes and ideas seem to become apparent over the course of time this study was implemented. Of the themes that seemed worthy to note, five can be considered from the children's perspective and two from the teachers perspective.

CHILDREN:

The following emerging themes can be suggested:

1. Ownership of the writing journal
2. Confusion in the writing
3. Feelings/emotions about writing
4. Hesitancy/questioning
5. Intrinsic motivation

TEACHERS:

1. Confused about the activity of the writing journal
2. Questions about the efficacy of the writing journal

When considering the children in the study, the areas such as confusion, hesitancy, and questioning are not surprising. The areas of ownership and intrinsic motivation say much to both researchers and teachers. Looking at the themes that emerged from the teachers, I was surprised. The areas of confusion and questioning of efficacy were interesting to note. The kind of school and philosophy based on trust, risk-taking and openness led me to think that the teachers would be interested and concerned about the writing process. There seemed to be both, but seemed to lack a true sense of purpose.

IMPLICATIONS

This study was both interesting and eye-opening. Researchers, teachers, and curriculum should consider these results when looking at the use of writing and the writing journal. Teachers need to be aware of these considerations and the part they play in instruction and realize that some children will be able to view themselves as writers in these early years. Probably the most important consideration is the ownership and intrinsic motivation this activity can yield. By keeping these notions in mind, teachers can start children on the path of autonomy and true motivation in the whole of the learning process. We must therefore conclude that both children and teachers have much to gain in literacy and language development in the use of the writing journal.

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